Masthead Logo

The Palimpsest

Volume 36 | Number 1

Article 2

1-1-1955

The Old Roads

George S. May

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXVI ISSUED IN JANUARY 1955 NO. 1

The Old Roads

"A bicycle trip through Iowa is a succession of discomforts," an Iowan reported to fellow bicycle enthusiasts in 1893; "in the Spring the mud renders such a trip impossible; in the Summer the roads, having no foundation, become a perfect sand-bar, through which the wheel slips in all directions, giving the devoted rider many a fall, while the wind whirls the dust about his devoted head, filling his eyes, nose and ears, preventing his opening his mouth to even call down blessings on the man who made the roads." Fall, he declared, was the best season, "but woe be he who wanders far from home, for the least rain ruins the roads for a week, the soft dirt absorbing the moisture readily and the wagons cutting ruts that make cycling a torment."

Poor roads were not confined to Iowa. In 1868 the United States Commissioner of Agriculture declared that good roads "were the exception in all the States." When the Office of Road Inquiry took its first road census in 1904 only a minute

fraction of the nation's 2,150,000 miles of road had hard surfaces, while just 7 per cent were classified as "improved." This term included roads surfaced with stone, gravel, or even sawdust and oyster shells. The remainder were simply dirt roads. Dean Charles F. Curtiss of Iowa State College declared in 1903 that "America has easily the best railway system in the world and at the same time the most inferior public highway system of all the leading and most progressive nations."

Iowa furnished a prime example of the magnitude of the road problem in the large and thinly populated western states. In 1904 it had 102,448 miles of road, ranking third in the nation behind Texas and Missouri. Of this mileage, 1,403 were graveled, 241 were macadam or some other form of stone road, and 20 were surfaced with other materials. All told, only 1.62 per cent of the state's roads were improved, considerably less than in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota.

Iowa's dirt roads earned it an unenviable reputation as one of the worst "mud road" states, confirming the truth of the old adage, "the better the soil, the poorer the roads." In pioneer days such roads as the famous "ridge roads" had been built to conform to natural drainage patterns. Later, when roads were laid out along section lines as an accommodation to landowners, this advantage was thrown away. "Even animals," C. R. Allen,

Ottumwa engineer, remarked in 1892, "display more engineering skill in the trend of their trails or paths, than we have in locating our roads."

Actually, when dry and well cared for, the Iowa dirt road was an excellent highway. A writer in the Chicago *Tribune* in 1916 declared that only Georgia had natural roads as good as Iowa's, while other outsiders compared the Iowa dirt roads with the best French roads. But no matter how good the roads in dry weather, in wet seasons they became quagmires. In 1840 Judge George G. Wright asked a stagecoach driver how long it would take to reach Iowa City, twelve miles distant. "About five hours," the driver replied, "if we can find the bottom of the road."

Over eighty years later, on November 12, 1922, thousands of football fans left Iowa City after seeing Iowa beat Minnesota in their homecoming game. It had been a damp day, and it began to rain harder after the game. In a short time there was a traffic tieup on the roads out of Iowa City as automobiles which were not equipped with chains became mired in the mud of some of Iowa's best known highways. An estimated five hundred cars stalled between North Liberty and Cedar Rapids alone. Hundreds of motorists and their families spent the night in their cars or at nearby farm houses which they reached on foot. On Sunday, one farmer made $90 in two hours helping to pull cars loose, while the coffers of many other

farm homes were enriched. "Autos Stick in Iowa Muck; Gold Harvest in Iowa," headlined the Chicago *Tribune*.

The consequences of such unreliable roads were numerous. Most attention was given to the economic losses which resulted. In 1899 the Office of Road Inquiry declared that to haul goods a few miles to the railway station cost as much as it did to transport the same goods thousands of miles by rail. At the beginning of the twentieth century most students conceded that the annual national loss from poor roads was at least half a billion dollars. As a good roads writer observed, "Poor roads cost the country $1,500,000 every time the sun goes down."

Owners of vehicles constantly suffered losses due to the damage inflicted on their machines by road conditions. Especially affected in this respect were transportation companies. The struggles of nineteenth century stagecoach lines were matched in the 1920's by the difficulties of the bus companies. In April, 1922, for example, two days after the Red Ball Transportation Company opened the first regular passenger line in Iowa between Charles City and Waverly, heavy rains washed out bus service for five weeks.

Trucking pioneers faced similar handicaps. A large caravan of army trucks on its way to Camp Dodge, Iowa, in April, 1918, was able on its best day to make no more than 46 miles over Iowa's

roads. Even this distance was possible only by traveling from 7 A.M. to 2 A.M. the following morning, and by hooking together like a train so that the trucks could push or pull their way through the mud.

Efforts to advertise Iowa's economic advantages were hampered by the unfavorable reputation of its roads. Industries hesitated to enter the state when they might be unable to obtain necessary materials over the roads for several weeks during the year. In 1923 the Greater Iowa Association spent thousands of dollars on advertisements in eastern papers pointing out the economic wealth of the state. A Connecticut newspaper, perhaps still smarting from Iowa's victory over Yale in 1922, retorted that in Iowa football fans faced the threat of spending Saturday night stuck in the mud. "Who would live in that kind of state," the paper asked, "for all its agricultural wealth?"

Since the Iowa farmer was the principal road user, his losses were the greatest. Iowa's farms were among the leading producers of the country, but the farmer's problem was to get those products to market. An unknown poet observed:

> The Iowa farmer
> Cannot haul to market
> When the market is high;
> He must haul to market
> When the roads are dry.

In addition, muddy roads imposed virtually

complete isolation upon farm families, adding immeasurably to the burdens of an already hard life. Rural school district consolidations, with all their advantages, were difficult to achieve when it was hard enough for school children to attend nearby one-room schools. "The consolidated rural school," Governor George W. Clarke asserted in 1913, "will go halting and crippled until the permanent road passes the door."

Rural churches also suffered. "People will not risk a good car over Johnson county mud roads," the Rev. W. C. Keeler of Iowa City reported in 1926, "and as a result the country churches of Johnson county have been closed the greater part of this winter."

No argument was really required to convince anyone of the importance of road improvement other than to cite the disadvantages of the old roads and the obvious conveniences of having highways that could be used every day in the year. "It really seems absurd," Anson Marston of Iowa State College maintained, "that in a state so wealthy and prosperous as ours, so advanced as regards the education and intelligence of the people, the entire business of the agricultural community, which in Iowa is the basis of practically all business interests, should be left to the mercy of bad weather on account of roads which would be a disgrace even to barbarism."

GEORGE S. MAY